

**Third Space Feminism: Gender, Displacement, and Cultural Hybridity in
Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage***

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Abstract: This article examines the negotiation of identity, gender, and cultural hybridity in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's short story collection *Arranged Marriage* (1995), a seminal text in South Asian diasporic literature. Through a feminist postcolonial framework, the study interrogates how Divakaruni's female protagonists navigate the tensions of migration, patriarchy, and racialization while forging autonomous subjectivities. Drawing on theories of the "third space" (Homi Bhabha), the "production of identity" (Stuart Hall), and critiques of cultural essentialism (Chandra Mohanty), the analysis underscores how these stories resist binary representations of tradition and modernity. By highlighting the interstitial spaces occupied by Divakaruni's characters, the article demonstrates how *Arranged Marriage* functions as both a cultural document and a site of ideological resistance. The research contributes to ongoing discourses in feminist and postcolonial studies by illuminating the complex and evolving narratives of diasporic women in literature.

Keywords: feminist postcolonialism, cultural hybridity, identity, South Asian literature, third space

Introduction: The global phenomenon of migration—whether voluntary or compelled by socio-political forces—has profound implications for the construction and transformation of individual and collective identities. Within the framework of South Asian diasporic literature, the experience of cultural dislocation, identity negotiation, and the reconfiguration of gender roles has been a central thematic concern, especially in the works of writers such as Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee, Meena Alexander, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. These literary voices highlight the ways in which migration operates not only as a

geographical shift but also as an existential condition that destabilizes normative notions of identity, belonging, and home. For women in particular, the immigrant condition often compounds the complexities of gendered oppression with those of cultural alienation, making diasporic narratives a critical site for feminist interrogation.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage* (1995) emerges as a significant contribution to the field of diasporic feminist literature. The collection, comprising eleven thematically linked short stories, presents a vivid portrayal of Indian women grappling with the conflicting demands of traditional Indian values and the alienating, often disorienting, ethos of Western society. Through her nuanced depiction of migration, trauma, and cultural hybridity, Divakaruni sheds light on the emotional and psychological toll exacted by patriarchal structures—both inherited and encountered—and gestures toward the subversive potential of female agency. The collection resonates with Gayatri Spivak's critique of the "epistemic violence" perpetrated by hegemonic discourses that silence subaltern women, while also foregrounding moments of resistance, resilience, and transformation (Spivak, 1988).

The relevance of this study lies in its engagement with questions of identity formation, cultural hybridity, and feminist resistance in a diasporic context. In an increasingly globalized world, understanding the lived realities of immigrant women and the literary strategies that articulate their experiences is crucial for both postcolonial and feminist scholarship. The significance of the research rests in its ability to demonstrate how *Arranged Marriage* functions not only as a cultural document reflecting immigrant life but also as a site of ideological contestation and identity reconstruction.

Accordingly, the objective of this article is to examine how Divakaruni's protagonists negotiate their identities in intercultural, often liminal spaces. By drawing on Homi Bhabha's theory of the "third space" (1994) and Stuart Hall's conceptualization of identity as a process of "production" rather than a fixed essence (Hall, 1990), the study explores how the female subjects in *Arranged Marriage* challenge monolithic cultural narratives and patriarchal constraints. Ultimately, the article seeks to illuminate the ways in which Divakaruni's narratives foreground the dynamic and often fraught process of identity formation, as shaped by displacement, memory, and aspiration.

Theoretical Framework: Feminist Postcolonialism and Diasporic Identity Formation:

The critical lens of feminist postcolonial theory provides a nuanced framework for interrogating the gendered dynamics of displacement, migration, and identity reconstitution in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage*. This approach is vital to the current study as it allows for an examination of the lived realities of diasporic women at the intersection of cultural hybridity, historical marginalization, and patriarchal subjugation. Feminist postcolonialism does not treat women from formerly colonized societies as a monolithic or uniformly oppressed group; rather, it insists on acknowledging the

heterogeneity of their experiences and the agency embedded within their narratives (Mohanty, 2003).

The significance of employing this framework lies in its ability to illuminate the dual colonization that postcolonial women often endure—first by imperialist forces, and subsequently by patriarchal structures within both indigenous and diasporic contexts. In *Arranged Marriage*, Divakaruni constructs a narrative space wherein the female subject is not simply a passive victim of cultural or familial expectation, but rather an active agent engaged in the negotiation and reconfiguration of her identity. This aligns with Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s call to recognize “the strategic and political location of the subject” (2003), particularly within global structures of inequality.

Furthermore, this study draws on Homi Bhabha’s influential concept of the “*third space*” (1994), which serves as a pivotal analytical tool in understanding the ambiguous, often contested sites of cultural interaction that Divakaruni’s protagonists inhabit. Bhabha posits that identity is not fixed or essential but is instead constructed within spaces of cultural negotiation—what he terms “interstitial” or “liminal” spaces. These hybrid zones enable the formation of new subjectivities that transcend binary oppositions such as self/other, tradition/modernity, or East/West. In Divakaruni’s stories, the third space becomes a crucible in which female characters reimagine their identities, not in opposition to, but through a rearticulation of their cultural and personal pasts.

For instance, in stories like “*Clothes*” and “*The Word Love*”, protagonists grapple with inherited traditions and the challenges of acculturation in the West. Their struggles—marked by moments of rupture, defiance, and renewal—reflect Bhabha’s notion that identity is always in flux and forged in relation to difference. The third space, then, is not merely a site of confusion or crisis but of creative possibility. It allows for what Stuart Hall describes as the “*production of identity*” (Hall, 1990), wherein identity is seen as a continuous process shaped by history, memory, and cultural interaction.

The objective of utilizing these theoretical frameworks is to underscore the dynamic processes through which Divakaruni’s diasporic female characters assert agency and resist subjugation. Feminist postcolonialism and the third space theory together facilitate a deeper understanding of how identity is constructed not only in resistance to external pressures but also through the internal negotiation of conflicting cultural demands. The significance of this approach is thus rooted in its capacity to shift critical focus from victimhood to agency, from essentialism to complexity, and from fixed categories to fluid and evolving identities. Through this lens, *Arranged Marriage* emerges not merely as a collection of immigrant tales but as a powerful literary intervention that challenges dominant discourses of gender, culture, and belonging. It reveals the resilience of female subjectivity in transnational spaces and contributes meaningfully to the ongoing dialogue within postcolonial and feminist literary studies.

Cultural Displacement and the Search for Self in *Arranged Marriage*: Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage* poignantly explores the complex interplay between cultural displacement and the evolving sense of self among diasporic women. In the opening story, "*The Bats*," the narrator—a young girl—experiences the trauma of domestic violence as her mother repeatedly escapes and returns to an abusive marriage. The act of leaving home, though initially framed as a temporary retreat, becomes symbolic of a broader existential rupture and the possibility of self-transformation. The cyclical nature of the mother's return to her abuser underscores the deeply entrenched patriarchal norms that bind women to suffering under the guise of familial duty. Uma Narayan (1997) aptly critiques this normalization of oppression within traditional cultural frameworks, arguing that the packaging of harmful practices as "authentic" or "indigenous" often masks their patriarchal underpinnings. Through the child's shifting perception of her mother—from a passive victim to a figure both complicit in and entrapped by patriarchy—Divakaruni presents a layered portrayal of intergenerational trauma and the gendered conditioning that shapes female subjectivity from an early age.

In "*Clothes*," the theme of displacement assumes a transnational dimension, as Sumita migrates to the United States after an arranged marriage, only to be widowed shortly after arrival. Her relocation, framed initially as an entry into the fulfilment of traditional gender roles, ironically becomes the site of her personal liberation. As Sumita begins to dress in Western clothes—symbolically shedding the sartorial markers of her cultural origin—she enacts what Judith Butler (1990) might describe as a *performative reconstitution of identity*. The story foregrounds how clothing becomes a material expression of subjectivity in transition, reflecting Sumita's reorientation from compliance to self-determination. This transformation aligns with Stuart Hall's (1990) assertion that identity is "not an essence but a positioning," emphasizing the contingent and constructed nature of selfhood. Furthermore, Homi Bhabha's concept of the *third space* (1994) can also be applied here, as Sumita navigates an interstitial cultural space where her Indian past and American present collide, allowing her to imagine new possibilities of being. Thus, Divakaruni not only critiques the limitations of traditional roles but also maps the emancipatory potential of diasporic liminality in shaping female agency.

Negotiating Patriarchy: Love, Shame, and Silence in "The Word Love": Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's "*The Word Love*" offers a powerful examination of the diasporic woman's negotiation with patriarchal structures that persist across cultural boundaries. The unnamed protagonist inhabits a liminal space between the traditional Indian value system imposed by her mother and the individualistic, emotionally expressive culture of the West. Rendered in the second person, the narrative constructs an immersive psychological landscape, implicating the reader in the protagonist's internal conflict. This technique underscores the alienation and identity fragmentation she experiences as she attempts to reconcile filial obligation with personal desire. Her failed relationship with Rex, culminating in a suicide attempt, dramatizes the emotional and psychological toll of living between conflicting value systems. The cultural pressure to conform to normative ideals of female virtue—rooted in

notions of sacrifice and purity—produces what Leela Gandhi (1998) describes as “affective colonization,” where emotional lives are regulated by inherited ideologies of duty and shame. Divakaruni further complicates this dynamic by framing sexuality as a contested terrain—both repressive and potentially liberatory. The protagonist’s sexual relationship with Rex is concealed from her mother, indicating the transgressive nature of female desire within diasporic Indian contexts. As Michel Foucault (1978) argues, the internalization of disciplinary power manifests most profoundly through silence, guilt, and self-regulation of the body. The narrator’s decision to end the relationship is not merely a personal rupture but a symbolic withdrawal from a cultural framework that denies hybridity and punishes deviation. In this sense, her psychological collapse is not a failure of love but a rebellion against a binary cultural logic that precludes alternative subjectivities. The story critiques both Eastern and Western paradigms of femininity and offers a subtle rethinking of diasporic identity as fractured, contingent, and emergent—a space where patriarchal scripts are both enacted and resisted.

Encounters with Racism and Cultural Superiority in “Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs”: In “*Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs*,” Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni explores the immigrant subject’s disillusionment with the American Dream through a stark depiction of racial violence and social exclusion. Jayanti, a young woman from India, initially arrives in the United States full of romanticized notions about Western modernity and progress. Her image of America as a land of golden opportunity -- rooted in postcolonial imaginings of the West as a space of liberation—is shattered when she becomes the target of a racist assault. The verbal abuse she suffers, including being called a “nigger” by white children, exposes the systemic racial hierarchies embedded in American society. This encounter reveals the continuity between colonial structures of racial classification and contemporary forms of xenophobia. As Frantz Fanon (1967) notes in *Black Skin, White Masks*, the colonial subject internalizes the gaze of the dominant race, often only to encounter its violent rejection. Jayanti's trauma reflects this violent awakening: the symbolic violence of racial slurs functions not only to humiliate but to remind her of her racialized position in the American social order.

Moreover, Divakaruni problematizes the protagonist’s own class and cultural privilege within the diasporic context. Jayanti, an upper-class Indian woman, arrives in the U.S. with a sense of cultural superiority rooted in her education and socio-economic background. However, the racial abuse she experiences ruptures this sense of privilege and forces a confrontation with the complex hierarchies that shape immigrant identity. Her initial belief in a stable binary between India and the West—where the West symbolizes progress and empowerment—is destabilized as she realizes that racial identity can override class, education, and cultural capital. This moment foregrounds what Stuart Hall (1996) describes as the “decentering” of the diasporic subject, where identity is not fixed but produced in relation to structures of power and exclusion. Divakaruni’s narrative thus underscores how the immigrant encounter with racism is not merely an external act of social marginalization but a deeply internal experience that reshapes self-perception and disrupts

prior assumptions of superiority. Alienation here becomes both a psychic and political condition, illustrating the multifaceted nature of diasporic identity in a racially stratified world.

The New Woman: Reimagining Femininity and Freedom: Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage* foregrounds a distinctive archetype within diasporic literature: the “new woman,” who resists reductive binaries of tradition and modernity. Her protagonists are not passive recipients of cultural imposition but active agents who reflect, question, and reconfigure the circumstances that constrain them. These women struggle within patriarchal expectations— particularly those inherited from both Indian and Western cultural scripts— but refuse to be immobilized by them. As Rustomji-Kerns (2004) asserts, Divakaruni's women “do not remain dazed into inaction” but instead “bleed into and flow through the main texts of contemporary American society” (p. 283), suggesting that they actively engage with and transform their social environments. This fluidity signifies a feminist reimagining of identity, wherein resistance does not always take the form of overt rebellion, but rather emerges through subtle acts of negotiation, refusal, and self-assertion.

Even in narratives where the protagonists remain embedded within oppressive structures, Divakaruni resists depicting them as mere symbols of suffering. Rather, her storytelling privileges ambiguity and complexity, allowing these women to inhabit in-between spaces where cultural hybridity thrives. These characters resist fixed definitions of womanhood, crafting what Bhabha (1994) refers to as a “third space”— a liminal zone where meaning is negotiated and identities are continually reconstituted. The stories thus articulate what Minrose Gwin (1991) describes as a “counter-discursive space,” where subaltern female voices speak not from the margins, but through dynamic processes of cultural translation and embodied experience. Through this framework, Divakaruni's women participate in the re-articulation of femininity, weaving memory, migration, and desire into new vocabularies of subjectivity. Their stories suggest that freedom is not a destination but a continual, and often fraught, process of becoming.

Conclusion: This article has explored the multidimensional experiences of diasporic Indian women as depicted in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage*, situating the collection within the intersecting frameworks of feminist postcolonial theory, cultural hybridity, and identity formation. Through close readings of selected stories such as “The Bats,” “Clothes,” “The Word Love,” and “Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs,” the study illustrates how Divakaruni's protagonists inhabit complex emotional and cultural terrains marked by displacement, patriarchal constraints, and racialized encounters. These women, caught between tradition and modernity, family and freedom, East and West, do not merely conform or rebel—they negotiate, reconfigure, and reimagine their subjectivities in ways that resist binary logic.

The significance of this study lies in its emphasis on *Arranged Marriage* as more than a collection of immigrant narratives; it is a feminist intervention that gives voice to

subaltern women in transnational contexts. Divakaruni's nuanced portrayals demonstrate that diasporic identity is not a static inheritance but a continual process of negotiation shaped by memory, trauma, and aspiration. By engaging with theories by Homi Bhabha, Stuart Hall, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, and others, this article contributes to broader debates in postcolonial and feminist scholarship about the construction of identity in globalized, intercultural spaces.

Further research can expand upon this study by examining comparative diasporic texts across different cultural and geographical contexts, especially through an intersectional lens that incorporates sexuality, class, and religion. There is also scope to investigate how younger generations of diasporic women in contemporary literature navigate these inherited tensions differently, perhaps through more digitally-mediated or queer frameworks. Ultimately, this research affirms the literary and theoretical importance of Divakaruni's work in advancing conversations on agency, hybridity, and the reimagining of female subjectivity in a diasporic world.

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